

BETHLEHEM TRANSFORMED: THE SECULARIZATION OF A MORAVIAN SETTLEMENT

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THE promise of religious freedom and economic opportunity attracted many sectarian groups to America in the eighteenth century and gave rise to a considerable number of experiments in religious communitarianism. Most of these communities were shortlived, a handful have persisted to this day. Although a few of these, notably those of the Hutterites and the Mennonites have been studied in some detail, little is known about many of the others.¹ The Moravians who arrived on these shores in the first half of the eighteenth century founded a number of religious settlements in Georgia, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. The most prominent of these was Bethlehem, in eastern Pennsylvania, a community which preserved its religious character for almost a century. This Moravian experiment in religious communitarianism has received comparatively scant attention from social scientists, due in large measure to the fact that the relevant documentary materials were written in eighteenth century German script and form part of a poorly and only partially catalogued collection of manuscripts.² Yet, the diligence of the Moravians in keeping and preserving letters, personal and communal diaries, autobiographical sketches, statements of accounts, deeds of property and maps, provide an unusual opportunity to study in detail

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¹ Cf. Lee Emerson Deets, *The Hutterites: A Study in Social Cohesion* (Gettysburg, 1939); John Andrew Hostetler, *Amish Society* (Baltimore, 1963); Victor Peters, *All Things Common: The Hutterian Way of Life* (Minneapolis, 1965); and Paul K. Conkin, *Two Paths to Utopia: The Hutterites and the Llano Colony* (Lincoln, 1964).

² The bulk of these documents have been preserved in the Archives of the Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. For a description of these materials see two articles by Kenneth G. Hamilton, "The Resources of the Moravian Church Archives," *Pennsylvania History*, XXVII (1960), 263-272, and "The Moravian Archives at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania," *The American Archivist*, XXIV (1961), 415-423.

the transformation of an exclusive religious settlement into a prospering American city.

Bethlehem was founded in 1741 by a small group of Moravian immigrants from eastern Germany whose stated motive for settling in the forks of the Delaware was missionizing: "the desire to inform others also of that which we know to be conducive to the eternal salvation of mankind."³ So powerful was this preoccupation with religious matters that the institutional structures of the community—economic, social, as well as political—were dominated by the religious values and imperatives of the Moravians. Although the conscience of a Moravian living in eighteenth century Bethlehem was bound to no specific creed, certain core assumptions underlying his beliefs may be singled out: His religion was pietistic, stressing *praxis pietatis* and ethical conduct over and above doctrinal uniqueness. It was Christocentric, regarding Christ as the sole vehicle through which man could hope to comprehend the nature of the divine, and worshipping Him as the Saviour whose sufferings on the Cross had atoned for man's sins. The Moravian's conceptions of religion was moreover, emotional. Belief was a matter of feeling the divine, not of understanding it. The heart, not the mind, was thought to be the seat of religious experience. Salvation, declared Zinzendorf, a prominent leader of the church, depends less "on the truth in ideas than on the truth in sensation."⁴ Finally the Brethren emphasized the social context of religion, defining it as a group experience in which the faithful were bound together in a community of love, but at the same time separated from the rest of mankind who did not share their beliefs and who therefore were not to be numbered among God's chosen people.⁵

These doctrinal assumptions had important consequences for the religious ethics of the Moravians. In the first place, the central emphasis placed upon the cultivation of personal piety

³ Address of the community of Bethlehem to the Governor and Assembly of Pennsylvania, June, 1743. (Diarium Bethlehem, Bethlehem Archives MSS.)

⁴ Zinzendorf's Eventual Testament, December 21, 1738. Cited in Johannes Plitt, *Denkwuerdigkeiten aus der Geschichte der Brueder Unitat*, Vol. I. (Unpaginated MS copy in Bethlehem Archives.)

⁵ John Taylor Hamilton, *A History of the Moravian Church or the Unity of the Brethren, During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society*. Vol. VI (Bethlehem, Pa., 1900), 4.

led to the development of a vast body of ethical precepts which spelled out in detail the conduct deemed appropriate to any given situation.⁶ This penetration of religious ethics into a person's every action is one of the most characteristic features of Bethlehem during these pioneering years. Secondly, the ethics accentuated a lack of consistency and coherence already implicit in the above mentioned doctrinal assumptions: These ethics could in fact be used to justify two very different courses of action—a militant and methodical pursuit of one's calling, in which work was regarded as essential to the maintenance of one's state of grace or an emotional and sensuous preoccupation with the glories of one's *status salutatis*, in which work was viewed as an unseemly distraction. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the majority of the Moravians resident in Bethlehem upheld the former viewpoint.⁷

The social institutions of Bethlehem during this period centered around the choirs, which formed the basic household units to whose care the upbringing of children was entrusted and under whose roofs all major social, religious, and economic activities were concentrated.⁸ The Moravian choir system entailed a rigid stratification of the community according to age, sex, and marital status. Separate choirs were formed for the infants, boys, girls, single Brethren, single Sisters, married persons, widows, and widowers.⁹ These choirs emerged as a consequence of Zinzendorf's attempts to enrich the religious life of the community by encouraging the formation of small groups whose primary function was to cater to the spiritual needs of their members through the provision of increased opportunities for prayer, song, study, and testimony.¹⁰ The stratification of these groups according to

⁶ Gillian Lindt Gollin, *Moravians in Two Worlds: A Study of Changing Communities* (New York, 1967), 16-19.

⁷ Otto Uttendoerfer, *Zinzendorf's Weltbetrachtung: eine systematische Darstellung der Gedankenwelt der Begründer der Brüdergemeine* (Berlin, 1929), 36-37. Cf. Ronald A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion, with Special Reference to the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1950), 410.

⁸ Gollin, *op. cit.*, 88-89.

⁹ Cf. *Diarium der ledigen Brüeder zu Bethlehem, 1742-1817*, 5 volumes. Bethlehem Archives MSS. *Diarium der ledigen Schwestern zu Bethlehem, 1748-1841*, 5 volumes, Bethlehem Archives MSS.

¹⁰ *Protokolle der Synode in Gotha, June 16, 1740*, copy in Bethlehem Archives MSS. Cited by Otto Uttendoerfer, *Zinzendorf und die Jugend: Die Erziehungsgrundsätze Zinzendorf's und der Brüdergemeine* (Berlin, 1923), 82.

age and sex was designed explicitly to maximize the opportunities for the manifestation of religious enthusiasm while at the same time minimizing the chances of such emotionalism being diverted from spiritual to sexual objects.¹¹ The link between pietistic zeal and sexual excess has not gone unremarked.

The very success of the choirs in fulfilling these religious functions soon led to an expansion of their responsibilities so as to include not only the spiritual, but increasingly also the economic and social welfare of their charges. By 1750, the choirs were providing their members with communal living quarters, food, clothing, and employment, and had taken over full responsibility for the care and education of the members' children.¹² The choir, in short, had taken over all of the responsibilities traditionally associated with the family, save that of procreation. The explicit subordination of family loyalties to those of the choir bears ample testimony to the degree to which concern for the maximization of religious goals dominated and overruled all other considerations. In this overriding concern for the spiritual welfare of the community, the potential economic disadvantages of developing separate choir industries, or social risks of abolishing the family were quite simply ignored. The hierarchy of values was defined precisely: If a man's family ties were likely to obstruct the missionary goals of the community, then the family obligation must give way.

The economic institutions of Bethlehem in 1750 were characterized by a communal sharing of property, labor, production, and consumption.¹³ Underlying the property arrangements was the Moravian conviction that all worldly goods belonged not to man but to God. Christ was regarded as the sole owner of all man's worldly possessions, and the community and the choirs were seen as mere administrators of God's wealth.¹⁴ In order to avoid unnecessary economic ostracism or political antagonism

¹¹ Synodal Verlasz, 1764, Marienborn, copy of MS in Bethlehem Archives.

¹² Hellmuth Erbe, *Bethlehem, Pennsylvania* (Herrnhut, 1929), 41-42.

¹³ "General Plan for the Brethren's economy at Bethlehem," 1744, Bethlehem Archives MSS.

¹⁴ Bruederliches Einverstaendnis; einige zur Bethlehemischen und Nazarethischen Brueder Oekonomie gehoerigen Momenta, Diarum Bethlehem, August, 1754, Bethlehem Archives. Translated by W. N. Schwarze in Jacob John Sessler, *Communal Pietism among Early American Moravians* (New York, 1933), 229-232.

from non-Moravians with whom they might have to engage in economic transactions, the Moravians agreed to hold most of their property under a system of proprietorship. Thus, the land upon which Bethlehem was built was held in the names of three prominent members of the community who acted as trustees of the Moravian church.¹⁵

In as much as a man's labor belonged to God, the community, acting as God's administrator, had the right to determine what occupation a man should pursue at any given time.¹⁶ The labor contract formalized in 1754 underscores the religious basis of the Moravians' communitarianism: "We do not accordingly regard ourselves as men servants or maid servants, who serve man for the sake of a wage . . . but we are here as Brethren and Sisters who own themselves to the Savior and for whom it is, indeed, a token of grace, that they may do all for his sake."¹⁷

Even though the Moravians in theory upheld the sanctity of private property and, technically, never appropriated the worldly goods of their members, they effectively prevented the immigrant from making use of the few possessions he had brought with him. The insistence on a communal sharing in production as well as consumption, in which the community took care of all the material needs of a member in return for his labor and the fruits of his labor, destroyed the foundations upon which a system of private property could have any real meaning or utility.

Under this system, Bethlehem developed an economy which, within two decades of the community's founding, supported not only a resident population of over 1,000 persons, but cared in addition for the bodily needs of a large number of itinerant missionaries for whom the settlement provided a way station on their journeys to more distant parts.¹⁸ In 1750, close to one-half of the labor force was engaged in skilled crafts; textiles, clothing, and leather goods, constituted their most prominent products.¹⁹ One out of every four persons economically active in Bethlehem was working in agriculture, the necessity of creating a self-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, paragraph 2.

¹⁶ John T. Hamilton, *op. cit.*, 144.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, paragraph 3.

¹⁸ Erbe, *op. cit.*, 87-88.

¹⁹ "Vertheilung der Brueder in ihre verschiedene Handwerke," 1750, Bethlehem Archives MSS.

sufficient economy apparently overriding the fact that, as one Moravian leader lamented, "The hearts of the Brethren do not in the least incline towards farming."²⁰ One out of every five persons normally resident in Bethlehem was devoting himself to full-time missionary activities. A small, but significant, minority was engaged in trade and commerce with the outside world, notably Philadelphia and a number of neighboring communities in eastern Pennsylvania, for whom Bethlehem supplied textiles, pottery, and hardware in return for such items as glass, salt, and gunpowder.²¹

During these years, the religious convictions of the Moravians not only inspired their work and influenced the structure of their economic system, but led them explicitly to subordinate economic interests to religious ones whenever the latter appeared threatened. Norms of Christian brotherliness rather than of profiteering were used as guidelines for all economic conduct.²² The accumulation of capital was condemned as resting "assuredly not under divine providence, but under the direction of Satan."²³ As with family loyalties, so also the occupation of a man was subject to change if and whenever it interfered with the pursuit of his religious tasks, no matter what the economic cost of such a change.

In 1750, the political institutions of Bethlehem showed no clear line of demarkation between sacred and secular power. The functions of decision making were diffused throughout the various institutions of the community and the structural differentiation of authority remained limited. Theoretically, Christ, as the Chief Elder of the community, had supreme authority over secular and sacred affairs.²⁴ In order to ascertain his verdict on a given issue, the Moravians resorted not only to prayer, but to the use of the lot, a practice which involved the drawing of a ballot from a container which generally held three slips of paper; one affirmative, one negative, and one blank. The lot was used both

²⁰ Letter of Friedrich von Marschall to the Direktorial Kolleg, June 11, 1762. Cited in Erbe, *op. cit.*, 146.

²¹ Letter of Spanngeberg to Zinzendorf, May 7, 1753, Bethlehem Archives MSS, quoted in Erbe, *op. cit.*, 73-74.

²² Bruederliches Einverstaendnis, *op. cit.*, paragraph 4.

²³ Herrnhut Diarium, December 30, 1745. Quoted by Otto Uttendoerfer in *Wirtschaftsgeist und Wirtschaftsorganisation Herrnhuts und der Bruedergemeine von 1743 bis zum Ende des Jahrhunderts* (Herrnhut, 1926), 49.

²⁴ Heinz Renkewitz, *Zinzendorf* (Herrnhut, 1935), 71-73.

in the selection of individuals to fill a variety of positions in the community, and to determine important issues of social, economic, political, or religious policy. The selection of a new member, the member's decision to marry, as well as the name of the proposed spouse, the selection of a candidate for a missionary post or an important political office were all matters in which Christ's will was first ascertained by means of the lot. In policy issues, questions concerning the establishment of new missions, the erection of a new building, the adoption of rules of conduct for a choir, or the selection of a date for the convening of a synod were frequently submitted to the lot.²⁵

Count Zinzendorf, as head of the Moravian church throughout the world, stood next in line of command, but in general was far too preoccupied with the affairs of the Unity of the Brethren as a whole to be able to devote himself to the day-to-day administration of Bethlehem. In practice, therefore, the leadership of the community rested with the Chief Ordinarius to whose care the direction of local affairs was entrusted and who governed through committee rule. At the top stood the Elder's Conference, whose membership was limited to the Chief Ordinarius, his deputy, the supervisors of the choirs, and the general supervisor for external, i.e., economic, affairs.²⁶ A general supervisory council, whose members represented the various branches of the economy, dealt with many of the routine economic matters.²⁷ Finally, the communal council, consisting of all adult communicants, gave a somewhat broader base to government, but since the council had only advisory powers, its effectiveness as a decision-making body was limited.²⁸ Although these committees did provide Bethlehem with a rudimentary base for democratic rule, theocratic authority predominated. The extensive use of the lot may be seen as one further illustration of the extent to which religion helped to shape even the political institutions of the community.

One hundred years later, the overwhelming majority of citizens of Bethlehem still adhered to the same religious beliefs and ethics

²⁵ Edward Rondthaler, *The Use of the Lot in the Moravian Church*, Unpublished Paper read before the Wachovia Historical Society, 1901. (Copy in Bethlehem Archives.)

²⁶ Erbe, *op. cit.*, 30.

²⁷ Letter of Spangenberg to Zinzendorf, October 8, 1755, copy in Bethlehem Archives.

²⁸ Erbe, *op. cit.*, 34.

which had been such a source of strength to the founders of the settlement.²⁹ But in every other respect, the community of 1850 bore little resemblance to its eighteenth century counterpart. The choirs had vanished, bequeathing to posterity only a group of handsome, but unusually large buildings, ill-suited to the housing needs of the family of the nineteenth century residents of Bethlehem.³⁰ The economic institutions had shed all traces of a communistic character. Where once their militant religious enthusiasm had led the Moravians to subordinate their economic interests to the missionary goals of the community, Moravian businessmen, workers, and artisans dedicated to the values of private enterprise, were now contributing to the laying of foundations for a capitalistic giant of the American steel industry.³¹ The abrogation of the use of the lot, except in choosing persons for selected religious offices, marked the termination of theocratic government in communal affairs.³² With the act of incorporation of the village of Bethlehem into an American borough in 1845, the community shed the last traces of religious exclusivism. Political authority now rested in the hands of a secular body of power-holders, headed by a burgess and nine councilmen, all of whom were elected by the voting citizens of the community, whether or not they happened to adhere to the Moravian faith.³³

In summary, the institutions which had once attested to the dominance of the religious factor in the community—the choirs, the communal economy, and the rule of Christ through the lot—had given way to social, economic, and political institutions of a purely secular character. Religion, which in 1750 had entered in a very real sense into every major role the Moravian played, had become but one role among many. The typical descendant of the Moravian *homo religiosus* was not only a Moravian, but an American citizen, a businessman, and the head of his family.

²⁹ Edmund Alexander de Schweinitz, *The Moravian Manual, Containing an Account of the Protestant Church of the Moravian United Brethren or Unitas Fratrum* (Philadelphia, 1859).

³⁰ Chor Diarum der ledigen Brueder, V, August 24, 1817; Chor Diarium der ledigen Schwestern in Bethlehem, V, August 11, 1841, Bethlehem Archives MSS.

³¹ Erbe, *op. cit.*, 155.

³² Rhondthaler, *op. cit.*, 7.

³³ Mortimer J. Levering, *A History of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 1741-1892, with Some Account of its Founders and their Early Activity* (Bethlehem, 1903), 681.

Moravianism was no longer a way of life in the widest sense of the term, but a mode of specifically religious conduct within the institutional framework of the church, not the community. The Moravians had preserved their religious identity in a period marked by considerable social and political upheaval not by altering the content of their religious beliefs or ethics, but by delimiting the sphere of influence of the sacred.

The precipitants of these far-reaching changes in the community structure of Bethlehem were manifold. A brief sketch of some of the important determinants sheds some light on the underlying processes of change: In the first place the identification of a man's religious calling with his economic calling provided, as in the case of the Calvinists, a powerful stimulus to the economic development of the community. Not only did it make the Moravian more willing to defer economic gratification and thus free additional resources sorely needed for economic expansion, but by making work a virtue in and of itself, it raised the level of economic output of the individual.³⁴ Moreover the fact that economic and social conditions in Pennsylvania in 1750 were generally favorable to economic development meant that the Moravians' industriousness was rewarded by a rapid expansion of the communal economy. They labored hard in fertile soil.³⁵

The growing success of the economic enterprises made it increasingly difficult for the Moravian to subordinate economic interests to religious ones. The achievement of economic success became not a means to an end but an end in itself. As a friend and contemporary of the Moravians, John Wesley, had remarked: "Religion must of necessity produce riches. But as riches increase, so will . . . love of the world in all its branches."³⁶

Another source of strain is to be found in the fact that the requirements of the economy for a division of labor conflicted with the Moravians' belief in the equality and fraternity of his fellow believers. The fact that in practice the missionary was clearly "more equal" than the agricultural laborer proved to be

³⁴ Zinzendorf's Eventual Testament, December 21, 1738. For a more detailed analysis of the nature and consequences of the Moravian work ethic see Gollin, *op. cit.*, 143-147.

³⁵ Gollin, *op. cit.*, 156-164.

³⁶ Quoted by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1930), 145.

a source of considerable dissatisfaction for many of the members of the community.³⁷

Paradoxically the success of the economy also reduced the incentive for the pooling of economic resources. And once the choir members had succeeded in separating their choir affiliation from their occupational status, the choirs lost a crucial share of their control over the daily activities of their members and their ability to influence the conduct of their members was thus further impaired. The choir system was also weakened by the fact that the growth in membership of the choirs although outwardly a sign of success, was detrimental to the pursuit of the intimate type of spiritual fellowship the choirs were meant to foster, and thus indirectly accelerated their decline. In addition the Moravians' awareness of work opportunities outside of Bethlehem, notably in Philadelphia, which often offered better living conditions, broke the choirs' monopoly over employment opportunities.³⁸

The failure of the choirs to adequately educate succeeding generations to the roles and values of the pioneers of the community contributed not only to the breakdown of the choir system, but also to the decline of the salience of religious forces throughout the community.³⁹ Moreover, the failure of the choirs to meet certain needs of their members, notably the need for social intercourse with members of the opposite sex (the single had none and the married very little), and the consequent reduction of marriage opportunities, proved an important source of general dissatisfaction with the choir system.⁴⁰

In the political arena the Moravian, who in the pursuit of his missionary and economic goals, was being increasingly exposed to the influence of outsiders, could not for long remain immune to the general spirit of unrest and the demands for radical political and economic reforms being made all around him. The ideology of the day sanctioned change and innovation and forced the Moravian to reexamine many of the values he had previously taken for granted. The American Revolution placed the Moravians

³⁷ Levering, *op. cit.*, 292.

³⁸ Gollin, *op. cit.*, 209.

³⁹ See Peter Boehler's extensive correspondence with Herrnhut, 1751-54, Bethlehem Archives MSS.

⁴⁰ Spangenberg to Zinzendorf, June 19, 1752, Moravian Archives in Herrnhut, Saxony, quoted in Erbe, *op. cit.*, 37.

in the center of political and military action, thereby not only intensifying their contact with the secular world, but forcing them ultimately to take a stand on the political issues underlying the revolt of the colonies.⁴¹ The revolutionary ideas of personal freedom and liberty struck at the very core of the Moravian's ties to his rigidly exclusive choir, community, and church.

These then, were some of the conditions which facilitated the secularization of the community of Bethlehem. Yet the central clue to the patterns of change observed is to be found not in any one factor, but in the interdependence of the religious, economic, political, and social conditions of the community. Thus, in Bethlehem the Brethren's devotion to religious goals enhanced not only their spiritual welfare, but, given the generally favorable economic conditions in Pennsylvania at that time, also their material welfare. The accumulation of wealth thus became objectively possible and represented an alternative interest in guiding the conduct of the Moravians. Once the accumulation of wealth became not a means to the furtherance of the religious goals of the community but an end in itself, it threatened the very values without which it could not have arisen. Similar patterns of interdependence may be observed between the religious, political, and social institutions of the Brethren.

Count Zinzendorf, after a temporary exile from his native Herrnhut in 1736, is said to have exclaimed, echoing Archimedes, "Da mihi locum et movebo mundum."⁴² He was given a place—Bethlehem—only it did not stir the world in quite the manner the Count had anticipated, being known to us primarily for its output of steel rather than missionaries. To this day at Christmas-time a giant star is erected to shine down on this town, illuminating a massive complex of steel mills in the shadow of which still stand the choir houses of the Brethren in silent testimony to a bygone age.

⁴¹ Levering, *op. cit.*, 680-681.

⁴² Zinzendorf's collected sermons and addresses, December, 1741, Herrnhut Archives MSS. Cited in Otto Uttendoerfer, *Alt-Herrnhut: Wirtschafts-geschichte und Religionssoziologie Herrnhuts während seiner ersten zwanzig Jahre, 1722-1742* (Herrnhut, 1925), 182.